

Protection of the Right(s) of Orphans in the *Nebii* (Prophets) and Its Implication for Contemporary Application in Igboland

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Abstract

This study investigates the rights and privileges of the orphans in the *Nebii* (Prophets) and the implications for contemporary Igboland. The study aims to analyse the welfare of the orphans in the Old Testament, particularly in the *Nebii* (Prophets). The condition of orphans in contemporary Nigeria (Igboland) is also explored. The study examines contemporary efforts of individuals, groups and communities towards ameliorating the impecunious condition of orphans in Nigeria. The research analyses key prophetic passages to understand the theological basis and practical manifestations of orphan protection in ancient Israel. It then critically assesses the current situation of orphans in Igboland. The research methodology used in this study is historical-critical method of biblical exegesis. The prophetic literature frequently addresses the vulnerability of orphans, condemning those who exploit them and advocating for their rights and well-being as a reflection of divine justice. The findings of the research indicate that orphans are marginalized in various means in the contemporary time. The study argues that the prophetic emphasis on justice and compassion for the marginalized, including orphans, provides a robust ethical framework that can inform and strengthen contemporary efforts to protect and support orphans in Igboland, advocating for improved welfare of the orphans.

Key words: Orphan, Old Testament, *Nebii*, Igboland, Right, Protection.

Introduction

The *Nebim* (prophets or prophetic books) consistently highlight the vulnerability of certain groups within ancient Israelite society, with orphans and widows frequently mentioned as deserving of special care and protection. The prophets, acting as the voice of God, often condemned social injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of the weak, including children who had lost their parents. The prophetic call for justice was not merely a social reform agenda but was deeply rooted in the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. God's commitment to justice and His care for the vulnerable were to be mirrored by His people (Gowan, 1987). Therefore, the mistreatment of orphans was seen as a direct offense against Yahweh and a betrayal of the covenant. The prophets such as Isaiah and others emphasized that true worship and obedience to God involved demonstrating compassion and ensuring the welfare of the marginalized. This included advocating for legal protections, condemning exploitative practices, and calling for a society where orphans could live with dignity and security.

In contemporary Igboland, a region in southeastern Nigeria, the socio-cultural landscape is characterised by a strong emphasis on kinship, community, and traditional values, often intertwined with Christian faith. However, despite these cultural strengths, orphans continue to face significant challenges. These can range from neglect and exploitation within extended family structures to inadequate access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Ugwuewo (2019) posits that the situation to which contemporary society exposes parentless children is undeserved. Nweze (2015) adds that orphans are facing a lot of problems such as child neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, child labour, child trafficking, denial of basic education, child malnutrition, etc.

The *Nebim* (Prophets) contain a consistent and strong advocacy for the protection of orphans, framing it as a fundamental aspect of divine justice and covenantal faithfulness. These prophetic pronouncements condemn the exploitation of orphans and call for their care and well-being. In addition, it is observed that the robust ethical and theological ground for orphan protection found in the *Nebim* and the lived realities of orphans in contemporary Igboland remains a challenge especially in the 21st century. The specific teachings and condemnations within the *Nebim* concerning the rights and protection of orphans, and the theological basis for this emphasis is considered. The current socio-economic, cultural, and religious realities affecting orphans in Igboland and other related factors are necessary to be investigated. The findings indicate that principles and directives found in the *Nebim* regarding orphan protection are not consistently applied to address the contemporary challenges faced by orphans in Igboland. Ugwuewo (2019) avers that orphans who are not given proper parental care and discipline may probably grow up to

become threat to social virtues of the society, they may probably become agents of social vices ranging from stealing to robbery and arm robbery, cyber theft, prostitution, kidnapping, rape, and could become any other form of nuisance to contemporary Nigeria in general and Nkanuland (a region in Igboland) in particular. This study aims to bridge the ancient prophetic concern for orphans with the contemporary realities and challenges faced by orphaned children in Igboland. It seeks to analyse the prophetic corpus in the Old Testament and explore its implications for developing a more effective platform for the welfare of orphans in Nigeria (Igboland).

The research methodology adopted in this study is the historical-critical method. This method is used to shed more light on the biblical narratives, especially their origin and context. According to Obiorah (2015, p.90), “historical critical method takes cognisance of the historical development of the biblical passages, which have diverse audiences over time.” It is a scholarly approach analysing texts through historical reconstruction, literary criticism, and contextualization to determine original meaning. It uses textual criticism to compare manuscripts to determine as well as establish original wordings (Metzger, 2005). This methodology is suitable for this study because prophetic warnings on the care for orphans are an ancient practice in the Old Testament that needs to be explored from its original context for contemporary application. The data are collected and analysed qualitatively.

Conceptualising Orphan/Orphanhood

Orphanhood, according to Word Finder (2018) is the state or condition of being an orphan. The loss of both parents through death; it is the condition of being a child without living parents. According to Ugwuewo (2019), the second meaning of the above term as defined by Word Finder can put one in a dilemma, as there are many wealthy and prosperous members of the society who have lost their parents through death. The third rendition of the term is also insufficient because it lacks inclusion of age of such children without parents. Hence, it is only a denotative meaning of orphanhood probably for non-critical reader. However, Nweze (2015) posits that orphanhood as a concept could be viewed from multi-dimensional perspectives. He went further to aver that an orphan (Heb. יתום; Greek, ὀρφανός) is a child permanently bereaved of or abandoned by his or her parents. Fitzgerald (2016) contends that:

The English word “orphan” today is used almost exclusively of a child who has lost both parents due to death. In antiquity, by contrast, children who had lost either the father or the mother were routinely regarded as orphans. Given the patriarchal world of antiquity, it is not surprising that the focus was on the loss of the father, so that the orphan was typically regarded as “fatherless.” This is seen above all in the frequent association of orphans with widows, with the latter having lost her husband and the former their father (p. 30).

National Plan of Action, Zimbabwe (2004) gives a clear definition of an orphan; thus, the definition of a child in this document is any person below the age of 18 years. Orphans are those children whose parents have died; other vulnerable children are children with unfulfilled rights. Abebe (2017) states that orphanhood is a generic categorisation used mainly to describe a parental status, as well as the socio-economic condition of children who have lost one or both parents due to various causes. In the Jewish culture, an orphan is a male child whose father is deceased; Holladay (1988, p.148) expresses this thought in the following words: “An orphan is a boy who has become fatherless.” This is probably because the ancient Jewish society considered women and children as inconsequential members of the society. Ugwuewo (2019) maintains that the above ancient Jewish understanding of an orphan is a clear indication that women and female children were not regarded as important members of the society. They are inconsequential in the Jewish hegemony.

Causes of Orphanhood

Numerous factors are articulated as causes of orphanhood. Some of these factors are discussed in this paper.

HIV/AIDS: Show Hope (2014) observes that HIV/AIDS is one of five terrible causes of the global orphan crisis. Worldwide, there are an estimated 17.8 million children under the age of 18 who have been orphaned by losing one or both parents to HIV/AIDS. By 2015, it is expected that this number will rise to 25 million. Radenkovic (2016 para 1-4) adds that in Nigeria, almost a million children become orphaned annually, mainly because of AIDS and poverty.

Poverty: Nearly half of the world’s population live on less than \$2.50 a day. Even more, 1.3 billion people are considered to be living in extreme poverty with less than \$1.25 a day. This means that many people cannot afford to provide nutrition, shelter, and care for their children. Many children who become orphans are abandoned by parents, not due to a lack of love, but due to a lack of resources to care for their basic needs. Faith to Action Initiative (2014, p. 3) pinpoints thus “the most frequent causes of separation of children from parental care include poverty, lack of access to basic services, abuse, neglect, disease, disabilities, and emergencies.”

Corruption: Corruption sustains the orphan crisis in many terrible ways, be it through corrupt government officials or individuals who profit from the trafficking of vulnerable children. Countries that suffer from domestic unrest as a result of corruption often close their borders to inter-country adoption, making it nearly impossible for orphaned children to receive the life-giving care they desperately need. Ugwuewo (2019) avers that marginalisation, exploitation, sexual harassment, bribery, malpractice, avarice, human trafficking, etc., are corrupt practices prevalent in Nigeria. These practices may lead to termination of lives which may consequently to loss of one’s parent(s).

War: War contributes to the orphan crisis in two major ways. Firstly, many children lose their parents in the physical act of war, be it directly when soldiers are killed in combat, or indirectly when innocent civilians are killed in an act of warfare. Aderemi (2010) remarks that there have been serious ethno-religious crises in Nigeria since 1979 up to date which have claimed many lives and property. A good example is Boko-Haram insurgency in Nigeria since 1979 till date, and Fulani Herdsmen attack in Nigeria and other related crisis that have claimed lives (Ugwuewo, 2019).

Orphanhood in the *Nebiiim*

Command to seek the welfare of the destitute, including orphans, is prevalent in the Old Testament. Nweze (2015, p.73) opines that “it is worthy to note that orphans were among the three sets of people (widows, orphans and aliens) that were given prominence in the Old Testament.”Gowan (1984), in Nweze (2015), looks into the Old Testament and views the widows, the orphans and sojourners in terms of economic and socio-justice. It will possibly look into the attitude of the people of the Old Testament towards orphans. It is of the utmost divine concern that orphans must not in any way be exploited or abused. The culture of seeking the welfare of orphans is not bizarre in the Old Testament because the nations that existed before them, known as Ancient Near Eastern nations, were not unfamiliar with such a culture. The Old Testament people in the time past had interactions with the Ancient Near East. So, orphanhood and care for them is not a new trend among people of the Old Testament (Ugwuewo, 2019). Fensham (1962) maintained that the protection of the widow, orphan and the poor was the common policy of the Ancient Near East. Confirming the foregoing, Duchan (2011) reports that the people of Mesopotamia provided support for widows, orphans, old people, especially old women, sterile and childless women, cripples, and those who were blind or deaf.

In the *Nebiiim* (Prophets), the welfare of orphans was not neglected by the ancient prophets of Israel. In this line of thought, Patterson (1973) strongly argues that the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the poor is not neglected by the prophets of Israel. They point out that Israel had betrayed their wickedness and lack of God-oriented perspective in their treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the poor (Isa. 1:23; 10:1-2; Jer. 7:4-16). Typical of this use of the motif are the words of Ezekiel: Behold, the princes of Israel, everyone was in thee to their power to shed blood. In thee have they set light by father and mother: in the midst of thee have they dealt by oppression with the stranger: in thee have they vexed the fatherless and the widow (Ezk 32:6-7). Jeremiah lamented “How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow! Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens, we are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows” (Lam 1: 1). But thanks be to God! The Just One would remember her cause. Once

He had pled: Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:16-18). The above texts imply that the God of Israel is solemn about the welfare of orphans. Consequently, the predators of these orphans can be solemnly punished for neglecting to show required concern to the orphans, as it is a command by the LORD. The text of this study, Isaiah 10:1-4: “Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this, his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still,” obviously reveals that oppressors of the orphans undergo great loss under the great wrath of the LORD.

Ottu (2013) posits that this *yātôm* which means an orphan belongs to group of persons which also constitute the poor in Isaiah’s society. And these orphans alongside widows were the victims of bureaucracy of the wicked rulers. Ellicott (2016) reports that the decision of the unjust judge was not favorable for the orphans and their equivalent, and the outcome of it all was that the poor, the widow, and the orphans got no redress. Orr (2010) intones that these (orphans and widows) were the classes who were the chief sufferers by the perversion of justice (comp. Isaiah 1:17, 23). They were exactly the classes for whom God had most compassion, and whom he had commended in the law to the tender care of his people. Lange (2016, para6) observes critical analysis of the text in the following words “rulers rob them of the benefits of justice that are their rights.

This negative proceeding has the further aim of making themselves possessors of the property of widows and orphans.” Mathew (2018) contends that the arbitrary rulers use bureaucratic rule to make widows’ houses and estates their prey and they rob the orphans of the little that is left for them, because they have no friend to appear for them. Not to relieve them if they had wanted, not to right them if they were wronged, but to rob them because on the side of the oppressors there was power, and the oppressed had no comforter. Pooles (2016) is of the view that the phrase “of my people” correlates to Israelites who profess themselves to be God’s people, and whom the LORD did take into covenant with himself; and therefore this is an injury not only to them, but to the LORD also. This exaggerates that exploitation of the orphans means total negligence of LORD who has given power and wealth to the echelon who possess them.

However, exploitation of the orphans requires severe punishment in *Nebiiim*. Barner (1834) notes that the prophet, particularly Isaiah proceeds to denounce the judgment, or punishment, that would follow the crimes specified in the previous verses. That punishment was the invasion of the land by a foreign force. Bart (n.d, para1) highlights the impending punishment for exploiting orphans as follows: “under whose protection will they leave their wealth, their dignities, their glory, which they have been heaping up for themselves? Captivity or death are (sick) the only prospects before them.” Hence, they can never escape in any way the punishment meted out for them.

Orphans in Contemporary Nigerian Society (Igboland)

The situation of orphans makes them vulnerable to moral evils among which are rape, mutilation, human trafficking, poor health, poor parental training etc. UNICEF (2002) underscores that evidence also exists to show that orphans in Nigeria live in deplorable conditions and are exposed to neglect, exploitation, abuse and deprived of basic human rights and needs. McKenaa (2010) avers that Nigeria is facing an emergency situation in which millions of children are in dire need of care and special protection measures. The burden of poverty makes families and communities unable to cope with the increased number of orphans. Orphanages or other group residential facilities may seem a logical response to growing orphan populations but it can however, impede the development of national solutions for orphans. In the worst cases, orphanages can be dangerous and unregulated places where children are subject to abuse and neglect (Feranil, Herstad, Jallow and Mbuja, 2010).

This situation (poor implementation of policy or no policy for welfare and protection of orphans) is prevalent in Nigeria in general and Igboland in particular, because the level of plight of orphans, that is, people’s poor attitude to the rights and welfare of orphans seems as if there was no provision for their rights in the larger legal code- constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria, and lower part- bye laws of four main Local Government Areas. In other words there is unserious or poor adherence to the implementation of the law by the public. Today, orphans as well as other less privileged are only cared for by few concerned citizens; some of them who are under the so called care of the selfish and callous people suffer victimization and mutilation always. Individuals who wish to take the responsibility of the welfare and moral upbringing of orphans without external assistance probably from the government, wealthy philanthropist or Faith Based Organisation such as mission (church) may be strained by different factors including finance, pittance population of members, greed and other related factors.

Another challenge which orphans encounter in the recent time is examined by Sengendo and Nambi (1997) as follows:

Once a child loses a parent or both parents, such a child may be adopted by relatives from either of the parents' families. In most cases adopting parents live in different environments with which a child may not have been familiar. There are almost always associated physical and psychological problems: for example, the orphan may experience poverty for the first time (para 2-3).

They further state that many of the orphaned children continue to experience emotional problems and little is being done in this area of emotional support. There are several reasons. First, there is a lack of adequate information on the nature and magnitude of the problem; secondly, there is a cultural belief that children do not have emotional problems and therefore there is a lack of attention from adults. Thirdly, since psychological problems are not always obvious, many adults in charge of orphans are not able to identify them. However, even where the problem may have been identified, there is a lack of knowledge of how to handle it appropriately. In many cases children are punished for showing their negative emotions, thereby adding to their pain. (para 9).

Using Nkanuland as a case study, Ugwuowo (2019) analyses the condition of the orphan in Igboland. Male and female orphans have suffered greatly both prior to contemporary and contemporary Nkanuland in different ways. Sudden loss of parents gives people with ulterior and evil intention opportunity to take maximum advantage of orphans. Many a time, the extent to which they exploit orphans apparently indicates how desolate orphans are taken as prey by these wicked ones. It is necessary to bring to focus that it is maternal and parental relatives as well as close friends of the deceased parents of these orphans that push them to these menace. Some of the ways these orphans are exploited or preyed in Nkanuland include the following: denial of ancestral rights and heritage, tools of cheap and hard labour, denial of western education, female early marriage, child and human trafficking, social and physical abuse and so on.

Denying children of deceased parents their ancestral possessions such as landed property, houses, vehicles and other related items, is common in the contemporary society. Commenting on this issue, Bashir (2012) asserts that in some communities once a father or a mother of a child dies, the older ones in the family will take possession of the deceased's property leaving nothing for the young children. As a result, the child (orphan) may begin to roam the streets in search of food and shelter; sometimes, as a result of this hardship, the orphaned child could resort to criminal activities. Afwal (2013) avers that orphans suffer stigma, stress and trauma in addition to the loss of parental love, care and protection, and more often they are disinherited by their next of kin. It is alarming that orphans who ought to be helped to recover from the psychological trauma as a result of the loss of parents are turned into a means of undertaking menial and hard labour. The

worst of this concerns itself with the fact that sometimes the age of these children is not considered for such a hard task. For instance, an orphaned child of age bracket 10-15 can be made to wake up as early as 4:00am to fetch water from the stream, draw water from deep cistern, prepare meal, sweep the compound, mop the house and so on (Ugwuewo, 2019).

One cannot dispute the fact that children of deceased parents are children who drop out from school most times. Female early marriage was more rampant in the olden days than these days, but it does not mean that it is no longer in extant. Today, early and/or child marriage is common among female orphans. Female prostitution, robbery and arm robbery in one way or the other begins from trafficking of human. Though, non-orphans could be victim of child trafficking but orphans in many cases become more victims than non-orphans. Those who exploit orphans in that manner for selfish interest don't disclose their intention at initial stage. They pretend as helpers of the destiny of such an orphaned child, to train the child in school, learn a skill etc, but eventually handed them over into one thing or the other with sole purpose of satisfying their selfish desire (Ugwuewo, 2019).

Amelioration of the Penury Condition of Orphans in the Nigerian Society (Igboland)

In Nigeria, efforts are being made towards reducing the plight of vulnerable children is not sufficient. Family Life (2008) posits that orphans deserve the following roles from members of the public: prayer, speaking for them, giving them what they need, supporting those who support them, providing safe accommodation for them, visiting them probably in orphanage, cheering them up, mobilizing churches for them and giving sacrificially for them. In positive response to this clarion call, Hunter and Williamson (2000) outline different strategies to assist orphans and vulnerable children in the context of poverty. These are: a) to strengthen and support the capacity of families to protect and care for their children; b) to mobilize and strengthen community-based responses; c) to strengthen the capacity of children and young people to meet their own needs; d) to ensure that governments protect the most vulnerable children and provide essential services; and e) to create an enabling environment for poor children and families.

Prior to contemporary Igboland, particularly, Nkanuland, orphans were catered for in different ways. For instance, it is expected among Ugwuaji people of Enugu South Local Government Area of Enugu State, (one of the communities in Nkanuland), that if a child or children are left orphaned, the immediate relative(s) take the responsibility of providing parental care to the family (children) of the deceased parents. The immediate sibling(s) of the deceased parents may not be under custom to take care of the children of the deceased parents. They would do that if they will but not under compulsion. If the expected care does not come from them probably as a result of unwillingness or financial quagmire, the alternative care the children would receive comes from

their maternal home and other concerned individuals including good friends of the deceased parents (Ugwuewo, 2019). By implication there was no community provision for orphans in Ugwuaji since the olden days and the practice prevailed till date. Till date, such individual care as against community care for orphans abound in such communities in Igboland. In addition, families should not neglect moral responsibilities of orphaned children closer to them. Efforts should be incessantly made by family' members especially the leadership level of each family (parents) to curb the ever increasing problems of orphans because of the demise of their parents.

It is arguable that there is no recognised communal welfare for orphan in contemporary Igboland. This implies that it is elusive to trace any organised welfare package for orphans at community level. However, it is worthy of note to emphasize that it was normal in the era of ancient some communities such communities in Nkanuland in Igboland for farmers in communities such as Ugwuaji and some others, not to harvest every mature plants such as yam, cocoyam, potatoes etc in their farms during harvest time. Those reserved mature plants are left for the peasant members of the community including orphans. They had the freedom to enter such farm(s) to look for what to eat. Such mercy act gradually became a custom (Ugwuewo, 2019). Unfortunately, hardship and hunger brought about a total stop to this welcome development. Now most families do not even have enough for their daily feeding, to talk of reserving for the poor. This hunger epidemic is common among communities in Nigeria. Having seen that such attempt to better the condition of orphans is not sufficient as confiscation of ancestral property has made many orphans abjectly poor, and exposes them to social vices such as stealing and even robbery as well as other psychological problems. It is here that community leaders are expected by the prophetic oracle(s) in the Old Testament so as to seek redress for orphans, and to avert transcendental consequences.

Conclusion

The *Nebiiim* (Prophets) present a powerful and consistent message regarding the protection of orphans, emphasising divine justice, compassion, and the condemnation of those who exploit the vulnerable. The prophetic literature reveals that caring for orphans was not merely a social custom but a fundamental aspect of faithfulness to God and adherence to the covenant. The prophets' unwavering stance underscores that a society's true character is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members, including orphaned children.

In contemporary Igboland, while traditional values and the Old Testament prophetic corpus offer a foundation for orphan care, significant challenges persist, including neglect, exploitation, and inadequate access to essential rights. The prophetic mandate, when applied thoughtfully within the

Igbo context, provides a compelling ethical and theological framework to address these issues. By embracing the principles of justice, compassion, and selfless care for orphans, as exemplified in the *Nebiiim*, communities in Igboland can move towards creating a more supportive and protective environment for these children.

Ultimately, the integration of prophetic ethics into legal frameworks, community practices, and religious teachings holds the potential to significantly enhance the protection of orphans' rights in Igboland. This requires a conscious effort to translate ancient divine commands into contemporary actions that ensure every orphaned child can live a life of dignity, security, and opportunity, reflecting the heart of God for the marginalised.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian legal system should ensure consistent implementation of robust legal policy that explicitly protects the rights of orphans in Igboland. These should address issues of inheritance, guardianship, education, and healthcare, ensuring that orphans are not disinherited or exploited.
2. Leaders should advocate for educational campaigns to raise awareness among communities, families, and religious leaders in Igboland about the rights of orphans and the biblical imperative for their protection.
3. The government of the day should encourage and support community-driven initiatives that provide holistic care for orphans.
4. Churches and religious organizations in Igboland should actively integrate the prophetic teachings on orphan care into their sermons, Sunday school curricula, and outreach programmes.
5. Community leaders should prioritize their effort towards ensure that all orphans in Igboland have access to quality education and healthcare.
6. Individuals, community leaders and government should ensure that guardians appointed for orphans are screened for their suitability, integrity, and commitment to the child's well-being, rather than being chosen solely based on kinship ties or potential economic benefit.

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